

What is a tension headache?

A tension headache is a headache that feels like pressure or tension in and around the head. It is the most common type of headache. Two out of three people will have at least one tension headache in their lifetime.

Some people have tension headaches only once or twice a year, while others may have frequent or even daily headaches. Despite the discomfort, most people can continue with their usual activities.

What causes a tension headache?

There are many reasons why people get tension headaches. They can be triggered by one or more of the following:

- tension and stress
- tiredness
- long periods of reading, typing or concentration (eye strain)
- poor posture
- spine and neck injuries
- physical or emotional stress.

What are the symptoms?

A tension headache may feel like a tight band around the head, a dull ache on both sides of the head or a heavy weight on top of the head.

There may also be aching and tightness in the neck and shoulders. Tension headaches may become worse as the day goes on.

Treatment

You will be assessed by a doctor or nurse and advised of the best treatment. Tests are not normally needed. You may find that pain relief can reduce the severity of a tension headache, but the headache may not go away completely. Pain relief is safe when used as directed – ask your doctor or health care professional what is best for you. Analgesics such as paracetamol, paracetamol and codeine (Panadeine) and ibuprofen may help. In some people, physiotherapy, acupuncture or massage may help.

If you suffer from frequent or continued headaches, see your local doctor. They can refer you to other health care professionals, or you may need further tests. A headache may be a warning sign of a more serious problem, but this is rare.

Writing your symptoms in a diary can help in working out a treatment plan.

Home care

When you have the headache, take pain relief and rest. Sometimes having a warm bath or shower, or applying a warm or cold cloth or heat bag over the aching area, can help.

You should not solely rely on pain relief medication. The most effective long-term treatment is to make simple lifestyle changes that reduce the frequency of your headaches.

Be guided by your doctor or health care professional, but some helpful tips include:

- learn ways to manage your stress
- find ways to relax, such as yoga, massage or meditation
- have a healthy diet
- drink plenty of water
- exercise regularly – you release ‘feel good’ chemicals (*endorphins*) from your brain when you exercise
- maintain a good posture when you are upright, try not to slouch when sitting as this puts strain on neck and back muscles.

Notes:

Seeking help



In a **medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

See your local doctor or return to the emergency department if:

- you get a headache that is severe and 'out of the blue' (a sudden onset)
- the pain is worse when you cough, sneeze or strain
- the pain is getting worse, despite taking pain relief
- the pain is worse when you lie down
- you become drowsy, or confused
- your vision becomes blurred, you have double-vision or any visual disturbance
- you are generally unwell, including vomiting.



For other medical problems see your local doctor or health care professional.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Visit the **Brain Foundation** website
www.brainfoundation.org.au
- Visit the **Headache and Migraine Information** site
www.headache.com.au

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 0578 or email edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au



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